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Reflections on Qing History

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A review of Pamela Kyle Crossley's *The Wobbling Pivot: China Since 1800, An Interpretive History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and William T. Rowe's *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Belknap Press, 2009)

On a recently aired episode of *Jeopardy!*, one contestant told a story about how her father always seemed to know all the answers when they watched the show together at home during her childhood. Apparently, the program was aired twice in her area, and her father would watch each day before his daughter's return from school, and then during the second airing of the show would impress her with his profound knowledge of U.S. presidential trivia, words that end in "cat," nineteenth-century opera, and so forth. This reminded me of something intriguing about the study of history: sometimes it's a little too easy to sound clever when you know what happens next. In the algebra of history, we start with both sides of the equation – a beginning and an end – and then get to pick how we move from one side of the equation to the other, over time. The selection of historical variables is a matter of personal discretion, and may be motivated by any number of political, philosophical, intellectual, methodological, or aesthetic considerations.

Preoccupied with questions of our own relevance, writers of history are often compelled to show how the trends they have illustrated as salient variables in one historical equation are linked to later events. This temptation is most pressing when the opportunity arises to link one's study to a topic currently in the news or in public discourse. I succumb to it regularly: writing grant proposals, I make shameless and sometimes risible attempts to connect the dispute mediation practices of merchants in nineteenth-century Chongqing to the post-Mao economic growth patterns of the PRC. Most of these links fall flat under the scrutiny of my colleagues, but the urge to convince others (non-historians most of all) that my work is both interesting and relevant is too strong. I will continue to tilt at windmills, and attempt to convince whoever will listen that my topic contains lessons about practically any aspect of life worth reflection.

This is part of the job, convincing a world focused on the nightly newscast that history matters. The problem is, sometimes the future makes fools of us. Forging links between the distant and the more recent past implies some sort of trajectory between past and present, and sometimes – especially for those of us who study China today – the people whose past we study come up with futures that we simply hadn't imagined, and which our narratives don't neatly explain. Unlike a thirty-minute game of *Jeopardy!*, history doesn't end. So unless historians are prepared to abandon the notion that their discipline helps people understand contemporary events, we have to keep coming up with new answers about the past to fit with new understandings of the present. Revisionist history is born.
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Tags: Pamela Kyle Crossley, William Rowe